

Interview with Srgjan Kerim, Candidate for UN Secretary General: “I don’t want to be everybody’s darling and I don’t want to serve anybody’s cause. I want to serve the cause of the organisation.”

 blogs.lse.ac.uk/europpblog/2016/08/15/interview-with-srgjan-kerim-un/

15/08/2016

The United Nations is in the process of selecting a new Secretary General to take over from Ban Ki-moon, whose term ends later this year. In the leadup to the appointment, we are featuring interviews with some of the candidates for the role. In the third of these discussions, EUROPP editor Tena Prelec speaks to [Srgjan Kerim](#), the candidate from Macedonia, on his background and on his vision for the UN. “The Secretary General should be the general of the Secretariat, and the secretary of the Member States”, he says, stressing his focus on UN management reform and revealing that he already has a clear plan for the first 100 days of office in case he is elected.



Let’s start with your background. You have been travelling the world since an early age: how has this shaped your path toward the UN?

I was born in Skopje, but I have lived in Istanbul, Munich, Bonn, Belgrade, Berlin, Vienna, New York, Paris and a few other cities. And I have learned quite a few languages along the way: German, French, English, Macedonian, Serbian, Croatian, Bulgarian, Russian, Spanish, Italian and Turkish. This very fact has made out of me a cosmopolitan person, and my outlook on the world is cosmopolitan. It has definitely had an effect on my world viewpoint and has made me engage with issues related with globalisation: my latest book is entitled *Globalization and Diplomacy*.

Are you happiest when you work as a writer and an academic or as a diplomat?

I have had four professions in my life, and each of them has had a role, a meaning. The academic profession is important for me. When I graduated from Belgrade university they offered me a route to enter politics, but I opted for academia instead, becoming a Professor in International Economics. This is important because it allowed me to quickly acquire relevant knowledge about the world. I have written 10 books on international economics and international politics.

Alongside academia, my involvement in politics has helped me to sharpen my reflexes, and to get a better feeling when it comes to dealing with people. I have also spent fourteen years working in business, having had important functions in two big companies, a French one and a German one. I was Vice-President at Copechim-France, a company trading in crude oil, and the CEO of WAZ Mediagroup for Southeastern Europe, covering all the countries from Hungary to Bulgaria. This has been a very important learning experience for me because it allowed me to understand how things work in these big systems.

Last but not least, there is my diplomatic work – which is, after all, my love. I have always been very open, happy to engage with people, very curious, and always ready for meeting new people. And I have learned that a goal needs to be reached through peaceful means, not through force. Diplomacy is the art of achieving aims through legitimate means. My mantra is that each and every aim, however hard and complicated it may be, can be achieved in a peaceful way. Multilateralism is what I have been focusing on over the past three decades: connecting countries and connecting peoples. Multilateralism led by the United Nations was the core of my diplomatic activities for more than 3 decades. This is why I have decided to run for the position of UN Secretary General.

Speaking of multilateralism and of connecting nations, you held important positions in Yugoslavia as well. What is your opinion of the former Yugoslav federation? Do you think it was a failed experiment?

Yugoslavia is not the only state formation that has not been able to hold together. Sooner or later, state formations are tested by history. Yugoslavia failed this historical test for several reasons, but most of all because clearly institutions were not strong enough, and democratic enough, to hold together.

Are you sorry about that and what lessons can be learned from the experience?

I was a part of it, and had been actively working with representatives of the federal government to hold this unity together in different forms, to avoid war. This was my main concern, to avoid the death of innocent people. Looking at it from this angle, yes, it was very difficult for me to see what happened. And I believe that it was possible to solve the whole matter peacefully. The best proof that I was right about this is the fact that the old borders (those present during Tito's time) have, eventually, not been changed. The only viable option to integrate these countries is through their membership in the European Union.

We all learn, and the international community learns as well. It is telling that in the case of Macedonia, both UN missions have been very successful. Whenever preventive diplomacy is used properly and in a timely manner, it is capable of stopping bloodshed. When it is late, as it was in Croatia and in Bosnia-Herzegovina, then diplomacy is required to correct these mistakes.

But today, in the case of Syria, preventive diplomacy is no longer possible. What solutions can be found in this situation?

That is correct, but by leveraging multilateralism we can still make a road map toward peace. First of all, we need to ensure a ceasefire. Second, we need negotiations between the parties involved. Third, it is necessary to guarantee peace and stability all around Syria's borders and in the whole region. And fourth, we need to work on the nation-building process.

There needs to be a well-drawn line between what is usually defined as 'rogue states' and the interruption of the nation-building process. It is legitimate to bring down a dictator, but it is not legitimate and it is not good to bring down states and nations because of this. You see what happened in Libya: it was necessary to sideline Gaddafi, but not at the cost of destroying Libya's integrity, undermining its institutions and unleashing chaos.

Tell us about your UN manifesto. How did you put it together?

My manifesto was born after a year-long consultation process with all 193 UN member states. I have consulted them in various forms – through regional groups and interest groups. I had meetings with the African Union, Caribbean States, the Small Island states, the Arab League, the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation, the European Union, South America, and individual member states. I have been in each of the capitals of the P5: Beijing, Moscow, Washington, Paris, London. And I have visited more than 60 other countries. The manifesto is a result of these consultations, in which I practically involved the whole membership.

The reform of the UN's management structure is the first point on your candidature manifesto. Why do you consider it of crucial importance?

At the UN we already have a number of goals, agreements and resolutions already in place: on sustainable development, on climate change, on financing for development, on human rights. Security architecture is another matter: this needs to be addressed and modernised. The security architecture needs to be adjusted to modern threats.

So we have all these roadmaps, but we have a problem. Our problem is the decision-making system in the Secretariat, which is extremely bureaucratic and complicated at the moment. And the Secretariat is in charge of the operations. If this fails, all the plans fail as well. This is why we need a UN Secretary General with a very clear vision on management reform: someone who will be the Secretary General of the UN, and not of the whole world.

And these targets need to be addressed within a five-year term. I do not want to spend the first five years thinking about how I will be reelected. I want to set very clear targets, and if they are not fulfilled within the first five years, I will leave the position myself: I will not stand again. If I am to be reelected, this will be on the back of the results I will have achieved.

In order to accomplish these targets, you need allies. Your first allies are the member states. I will establish a Council of the Member States, which will meet on a monthly basis, it will be open and with no fixed representatives. Whoever wants to participate and give their suggestions is welcome and the subject will be known in advance each time. Second, I foresee the identification of focal points and the establishment of task forces in the Secretariat to implement the management reform.

How will you choose your staff members?

The Deputy Secretary General will be a woman and an expert in management reform. I have of course somebody in mind, but I cannot share this now.

I will talk in very practical terms. It is high time because we need to take over already in October, and if you don't know by 10 October where to start from and what to do, you are in trouble. I already have a plan for the first 100 days. The first 100 days the Secretary General needs to stay in New York for 90 per cent of the time, not travelling, not moving around. You need to stay with your people there and work hard.

The plan for these 100 days would be as follows. First, to tell people they are there to serve the member states, and not the other way around. One of the problems is that after 70 years the Secretariat's structure has become petrified, and people have started to behave as if the member states are there to serve them and their cause, and not the other way round. Second, I don't want people around me telling me we can't do something, but only people who will tell me *how* it will be done. Third, the rotation of employees – be it on the level of the Secretariat or broader – is a further strategy I intend to use to tackle inertia and bureaucratisation.

Deadlines must also be realistic. My pledge to improve gender equality in the Secretariat is that within five years I will bring the male-female ratio to at least 60-40. Right now the gender ratio is 78-22, which is a catastrophe and I want to make it more balanced. In order to do that, I will remove the jungle of provisions over the recruitment of people.

Under the present system, the wrong people end up being recruited because of an excessively centralised structure. We must have a more flexible and more operational system which is also decentralised: i.e. the people on the ground need to be able to make the final decisions on the recruitment for their teams. Last but not least, there is the role of the Secretary General. The Secretary General needs to be the *general* of the people working in the Secretariat, in the executive body of the UN, but the *secretary* of the member states.

What kind of innovations would you bring in your relations with the Security Council?

The Charter provides a basis for this: the Secretary General tables an item on the agenda when there is a threat to peace and stability. There is no scope for improvisation. What is important, however, is that the Secretary General understands that he is not there merely to report. The Secretary General has also the right, and I would say the task, to suggest and to propose how to approach big issues such as those in the Middle East, Libya, and Haiti. That doesn't mean that all these proposals will be accepted: nobody says that and nobody expects that. But it is important that the Secretary General initiates these discussions and is there to proactively push the Security Council to sit together, to discuss and to agree on a way forward.

You need a plan and I have a plan for everything, including the Middle East. I don't want to share the whole plan now but can share the two main parts of the approach: first, you need to regard Israel as part of the solution, and not only as part of the problem. And this has not been the case so far. Israel also needs to be involved in the work of the UN, which was also not the case until now. I was the first President of the General Assembly who tabled a resolution

prepared by Israel, to test whether the General Assembly was ready to accept a resolution tabled by the country. And it did. It was a resolution about technologies in agriculture, but it doesn't matter, you need to start in a benign way. I wanted to show them that it can work.

Second, there needs to be a basic principle. The settlement between Egypt and Israel was based on 'peace for land' – and it worked. This time I say 'security for statehood'. We must make an arrangement which will 100% guarantee the security of Israel, and in return Israel will participate in a two state solution. The Palestinian state will be there where it should be, but this must be done on the basis of a total securitisation of the area.

Why didn't you take part in the debate between Secretary General candidates in New York in July?

The transparency dimension which was added to the current selection process is a very positive experience. However, this specific discussion was not a part of the procedure. It was an initiative by Al Jazeera with the office of the president of the General Assembly. I already had pre-scheduled appointments in the capitals of two Members of the Security Council. Once, I visited all the members of the Security Council making an exception with these countries would have simply been unfair.

This is the only reason, otherwise I would have participated. I think it would have been an advantage for me, as I think debating is a strength of mine and not a weakness. I was the most open candidate about a number of issues during the debates: I said very clearly how I would reform the Security Council and addressed issues like enlargement and veto rights. I am not hiding behind anyone, if they want me as Secretary General they must take me as I am – an honest and principled broker. I don't want to be everybody's darling and I don't want to serve anybody's cause. I want to serve the cause of the organisation.

Turning to your own country: do you think that Macedonia genuinely classifies as a democratic country at present?

Absolutely yes. The fact that it is going through a crisis is indeed a sign of democracy. Democracy is not a guarantee of harmony, quite the contrary, it is a chance for all the things to come to the surface – including some elements that are negative. In a dictatorship, you do not know what processes are in place. Crisis is also part and parcel of democracy.

Look at other South European countries. In Italy, the mafia wields strong power, judges have been killed – and it is still considered to be a democracy. Greece has gone through a military coup, it has brought down a king and brought in the republic. Spain and Portugal have also had their ups and downs concerning democratic processes. These are normal occurrences on the road towards democracy.

In terms of democratic development, you have a rich experience in the media sector. How do you evaluate the role of the media in Macedonia today?

Today, as in the past, the main problem for the media is how to get rid of the influence of politics. This embrace between the media and politics is always fatal, both for politics and for the media. There are faults on both sides, but if the relationship is too close then it undermines the credibility of the media, while those politicians caught trying to manipulate reporting will eventually pay a price for it.

I have to say that being involved in the media was the hardest part of all my professional experiences. In all the other roles I got by very well, whereas the media field has been the hardest for me to deal with. The only way to ensure the independence of the media is through economic independence. A second issue is ownership because very often, media owners are not interested in the good functioning of the media outlet itself: they want to use it as a weapon, as a 'kalashnikov'. I actually heard a media mogul from the region once put it in exactly these terms. WAZ – the media company I worked for – wanted to tackle both problems, i.e. to ensure economic independence and disconnect media ownership from political influence, but they did not manage this. They withdrew from the region in 2012 having incurred big losses and having faced problems with politics interfering in the functioning of the media in

every country in South Eastern Europe.

Please read our comments policy before commenting.

Note: This article gives the views of the interviewee, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics. Featured image credit: [United Nations](#) (CC-BY-SA-2.0)

Shortened URL for this post: <http://bit.ly/2aLdLzP>

About the interviewee

Srgjan Kerim

Srgjan Kerim is a Macedonian diplomat, the former Foreign Minister of Macedonia, and was President of the 62nd Session of the United Nations General Assembly.

-

